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Postmodernity and the Zombie Apocalypse: A Comparative Analysis of Max Brooks' *World War Z* and Colson *Whitehead's Zone One*

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by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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This report offers analysis of two contemporary zombie apocalypse novels that imagine the future for the United States. By considering how Max Brooks' *World War Z* and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* participate in critical conversations regarding postmodernity, this report reveals that these authors use the zombie apocalypse narrative to express concerns about social and cultural pathologies, as well as possibilities for utopian reform in the twenty-first century. By imagining the zombie horde as the radical other, the novels engage in discussions regarding racial and class inequalities in contemporary America. Ultimately, my analysis of these two texts reveals a disturbing tendency to imagine the zombie apocalypse as the solution to America's persistent social and political dilemmas.

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Introduction

The zombie's debut on American soil played to white American audiences' fear of Haitian Voudou and the Black bodies that practiced it. Victor Halperin's 1932 film, *White Zombie,* is widely cited as the first of the American zombie tradition. In the film, Murder Legendre, the evil Haitian "voodoo" master, threatens the breakdown of society at large, in this case represented by the white and heterosexual family. By turning Madeleine into a zombie, Murder symbolically rapes her and violates the social construct of the family as well as the miscegenation taboo, thus corrupting both the individual and society. Joan Dayan counts *White Zombie* among a corpus of racist and exoticizing representations of Haiti that served as a means to justify the "civilizing mission" of the American occupation of Haiti from 1915-1934.[1] For Haitians, Dayan writes, the zombie is ultimately "the most powerful emblem of apathy, anonymity, and loss." It is during the American occupation of Haiti, when "Haitians were forced to build roads, and thousands of peasants were brutalized and massacred" in anti-occupation rebellions, that "tales of zombies proliferated…" (Dayan 37). American soldiers, researchers, and travelers brought the zombie tales home to American audiences, initiating what was to become a long-standing and symbolically rich subgenre in American film and literature. It is a subgenre that is permanently imbued with the history of racial violence and American imperialism. As my analysis of two contemporary zombie narratives will demonstrate,

[1] Dayan, Joan. *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995. Print. 47.

the zombie continues to perform cultural work that recalls this raced origin in the twenty-first century.

According to Kyle Bishop, the post-9/11 era has seen a "renaissance" of zombie films and literature. His authoritative survey of the subgenre, *American Zombie Gothic* (2010), argues that zombie film and literature can tell us something about the culture that creates and consumes it. Following the cultural studies tradition in literary criticism, Bishop says that literature in general "addresses society's most pressing fears" and is a "barometer for measuring an era's cultural anxieties." Further, gothic film and literature offers a particularly accurate measure of cultural zeitgeist, and the zombie tradition is the chosen gothic form of the early twenty-first century: "From the beginning of the War on Terror that followed 9/11," Bishop writes, "the popular culture produced in the United States has been colored by the fear of possible terrorist attacks and the grim realization that people are not as safe and secure as they might have once thought."[2] The zombie, his analysis goes on to suggest, is the preferred monster to embody the culture of paranoia, terrorist warfare, and ideological clashes. The zombie renaissance has occurred, then, because the current state of affairs in American culture is particularly suited to the zombie's metaphorical scope.

Zombies have been a part of the American literary and filmic imagination for at least a century, and they have embodied different cultural fears at different times. Bishop's history of the American zombie presents a narrative of the zombie's metamorphosis on American soil: from the Haitian Voudou slave in the early twentieth

[2] Bishop, Kyle. *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture*. Jefferson, NC and London: McFarland & Company Inc., 2010. Print. 9.

century to a vehicle of an apocalyptic plague from the 1960s to date. Early zombie films like *White Zombie* (1932) betray Jim Crow America's fascinations with and horror of Haitian Voudou and the political and social agency it affords its practitioners.[3] Agency and a means for control in the hands of former slave populations was the ultimate fear for audiences of the 1930s. The damsel's transformation into a zombie at the hands of a symbolically black Haitian plays on audiences' anxieties about miscegenation as well as the ideological taint from Haiti, founded by the only successful slave rebellion in history (Bishop 38). George A. Romero's 1969 film, *Night of the Living Dead*, marks a break from previous zombie narratives for Bishop. In *Night*, zombies are created by radiation from space and crave human flesh instinctually (95-6). Audiences are no longer positioned to fear Haitian Voudou and the black bodies that practice it, but instead they are meant to fear the undifferentiated zombie mob that carries an infectious disease. While Bishop is right to point to a shift in the zombie narrative apparatus, he fails to articulate the constant element in zombie fiction – fear of the crowd, or what Fredric Jameson calls "proletarianization."[4] Colson Whitehead's novel, *Zone One*, makes it clear that this "fear of the mob" concept still carries with it a troubling racial component in twenty-first century America. Whitehead ironizes the common metaphor of the zombie-

[3] The first violent conflict of what was to become that Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) is rumored to have begun after a secret Vodou ceremony. Vodou was practiced in hiding by the enslaved peoples of colonial Saint-Domingue and is considered the principal method of subversive organizing that allowed isolated populations of slaves to coordinate efforts and spread word of the plans for revolution. The association between Voudou, black agency, and danger to the White establishment is a well-founded one. *White Zombie* played on this set of anxieties for White American audiences. For more on Vodou's role in the Haitian Revolution, see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Belknap 2005) and C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Tousaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (Vintage 1989).

[4] Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991. Print. 33.

as-non-human-other, reminding readers that for centuries this "other" role was assigned to African Americans.

This report is about two contemporary novels that imagine the zombie apocalypse in order to critique American culture. I read them in light of Bishop's work on the zombie renaissance, but aim to expand on his consideration of the zombie as a part of the gothic literary and cultural tradition. While the foundation of my work is grounded in cultural studies of popular forms like Bishop's, I believe that postmodern criticism can expand the conversation that Bishop initiates in important ways. The first novel, Max Brooks' *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (2006) tells the story of a global zombie pandemic that stops just short of total annihilation of the human race. Humanity wins the war against an absolutely evil adversary, but at a terrible cost of human life and environmental destruction. In this novel, the zombie apocalypse affords the United States an opportunity to rebuild and reorganize in a way that is closer to an especially conflicted notion of "American values." While the novel is international in its scope, in my view the United States remains the central protagonist. In "A History of the Future," I discuss the framing of the novel as a historical document and elaborate on the author's postmodern project. In "Postmodern Survivalism," I compare Brooks' novel to Colson Whitehead's more recent zombie apocalypse novel, *Zone One* (2011). While his narrative, like Brooks', is invested in critiquing contemporary society, Whitehead utilizes the zombie apocalypse to express a different political outlook than Brooks. In *Zone One*, the characters' efforts to reconstitute society fail utterly. The apocalypse does not offer America the same "reset" button that it does in *World War Z*. In fact, Whitehead ironizes

with some brutality the notion that large-scale disasters can "renew" culture in any meaningful way.

The novels are a part of the postmodern literary genre stylistically and thematically. Yet the narratives themselves are quite invested in critiquing elements of postmodernity. This tension perhaps emphasizes Jameson's adage that "our imaginations are hostage to our own modes of production;" however the relationship between postmodernity and social critique is a rather intimate one.[5] In my view, theorists of postmodernism often engage in apocalyptic rhetoric that characterizes the movement as a means of society's destruction.

Postmodernism is, in Jameson's words, "a problem." According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word is almost one hundred years old and is both an adjective and a noun.[6] Jameson adds that it is used alternately to refer to a program of aesthetics and a cultural zeitgeist tied to the post-1960 historical period (*Postmodernism* 1). Like science fiction, the easiest way to define postmodernism seems to be to point to it. Nevertheless, the word remains useful in that it articulates a certain set of themes that both *Zone One* and *World War Z* share with what has been identified as the postmodern literary movement. Postmodern literature represents the experience of living in the era characterized by widely available technologies of communication, globalization, fluid

[5] Jameson, Fredric. *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. London and New York: Verso, 2005. Print. xiii.
[6] "Post-modernism." *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed, 2000. Web. 29 April 2013.

economies of exchange, and the commodification of cultures and identities. Echoing modernism, postmodernism is concerned with the breakdown of previous forms of sociality, family and kinship structure, and community in the face of these global exchange economies – what is often referred to as fragmentation. The result is a pervasive anxiety about authentic forms of identity and nostalgia for previous eras in which personal and national identities were supposedly easier to locate.[7] Jean-François Lyotard writes that postmodernism expresses distrust in "grand narratives," or totalizing systems of knowledge, and instead emphasizes a plurality of worldviews and epistemological methods.[8] With so many disparate ways of making sense of the world – some empirical and scientific, others intuitive and experiential – that all seem equally viable, postmodern subjects often feel as if the world around them is unknowable. Many postmodern novels feature characters who explore different methods of knowing and who often feel powerless in the face of unknowable systems like global capitalism, racism or systemic oppression, and contemporary warfare.[9] Jean Baudrillard characterizes contemporary culture of fragmentation as "an era of simulacra and simulation," in which signs are no longer tied to referents, like a map that does not correspond to actual terrain.

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[7] For a general overview of postmodernism see Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester University Press, 2009), especially chapter four, "Postmodernism."

[8] Lyotard, Jean Françios. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. 1979. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Lyotard locates the impetus for the spread of postmodern culture in the increasing availability of the internet and other communication technologies: "It is common knowledge that the miniaturization and commercialization of machines is already changing the way in which learning is acquired, classified, made available and exploited" (4).

[9] For postmodern literature featuring the powerless subject see William Gibson's *Pattern Recognition* (Berkeley Books, 2003), Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (Anchor Books, 2000), and Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (Harper Perennial 1999, 1965). All three novels feature a female protagonist awash in a world governed by powers outside of their own scopes of understanding.

In Baudrillard's vision, reality no longer exists and instead we occupy a space of the "hyperreal" or the "desert of the real."[10]

Jameson writes that postmodern criticism "can always be shown to articulate visions of history in which the evaluation of the social moment which we live in today is the object of an essentially political affirmation or repudiation" (*Postmodernism* 55). In other words, writing about postmodernism often hinges on whether or not the critic is happy with the current state of social, cultural, or political affairs, and if not, what that critic sees as the ill of our times. Critics like Jameson and David Harvey point to postmodernism's relationship to capitalism, which according to Jameson has "no natural enemies" and is widely considered to be the only possible economic system (*Archaeologies* xii). Harvey especially critiques postmodern literature's failure to affect revolutionary political change and its potential to create apathetic "postmodernists" who are uninterested in opposing capitalism's world domination. Instead, Harvey argues, postmodernism in all its guises works to undermine political progress and instantiate existing hierarchies of power.[11]

The descriptions of postmodernism that I have traced thus far tend to pathologize the movements' cultural and aesthetic components. Harvey and Lyotard both term postmodernism a "condition." Even Jameson's less emotionally-imbued analysis of postmodernism's "cultural logic" diagnoses its source in "late capitalism," as if the economic system spreads like a cancer and chokes the life out of other possible economic

[10] Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Trans. Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. Print. 2.
[11] Harvey, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change.* Cambridge MA & Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1990. Print. 52.

systems. For these and other critics, contemporary society is sick, and postmodernism is its disease. Drawing on these morbid descriptions, James Berger notes that "theorizations of the postmodern…portray postmodernity in apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic terms."[12] The connection between postmodernism, disease, and apocalypse in the body of criticism I have cited here corresponds directly to representations of the zombie apocalypse – a connection that begs for a new analysis of the shared rhetorical projects of these fictional and critical genres. In this light, the zombie looks less like a campy gothic monster and more like the perfect embodiment of postmodern concerns about political apathy, loss of identity, disease, and the collapse of society.[13]

Not all scholars participate in the postmodern doomsday rhetoric, however: Linda Hutcheon and Eric Grausam have both contributed convincing work that demonstrates how postmodern literature does not simply "wallow in fragmentation" (Harvey 51), but instead interrogates American history and political life. Linda Hutcheon takes issue with Jameson and others' easy conflation between "postmodern" and "contemporary," instead suggesting that not all of contemporary culture is "complicitously critical and deconstructing."[14] By insisting on the distinction between the contemporary and the postmodern, Hutcheon effectively deflates much of the alarmist language of postmodern

[12] Berger, James. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print. 37.
[13] The use of the zombie as a commentary on political apathy is one of the reasons behind the organizing of large-scale "zombie walks" in cities like San Diego, Toronto, and Pittsburgh in recent years. See Colley, Jenna. "Zombies Haunt San Diego Streets." *U-T San Diego*. 26 July 2007. Web. 29 April, 2013. <http://legacy.utsandiego.com/news/metro/20070726-9999-1n26zombies.html>
[14] Hutcheon, Linda. "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern." U. of Toronto English Library. 19 January 1998. <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html#N64>

criticism.[15] Following Hutcheon, Eric Grausam highlights how canonical postmodern fiction does not retreat from reality or history, but instead depicts life in the U.S. during the Cold War. Novels like Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, he argues, utilize science fiction techniques like alternate historical timelines, apocalyptic scenarios, and virtual game theory to displace anxieties created by the very real threat of nuclear annihilation in the sixties and seventies. The novels I discuss here are in several ways an extension of what Grausam identifies: they imagine alternate apocalyptic futures for the real world in order to draw attention to not only its political and social realities, but also to potential futures. Like their postmodern predecessors, *World War Z* and *Zone One* blend horror fiction's monsters and science fiction's apocalypse scenarios not to escape from reality, as Harvey might argue, but to interrogate contemporary rhetoric of political change.

While some critics may not be satisfied with blending political discourse with "low" literary forms like science fiction, Peter Paik argues that "science fiction and fantasy, in particular narratives drawn from media often dismissed as unserious and trivial… are capable of achieving profound and probing insights into the principal dilemmas of political life."[16] His book, From *Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe*, places science fiction texts like the *Watchmen* comics and *The Matrix* films in conversation with political theorists to consider the political

[15] See Grausam, Daniel. *On Endings: Postmodern Fiction and the Cold War*. University of Virginia Press. 2011. And Hutcheon, Linda. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. Print.
[16] Paik. Peter Y. *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and the Politics of Catastrophe*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010. Print. 1.

imagination of the apocalyptic scenarios on display in the science fiction.[17] *World War Z* and *Zone One* depict far-fetched scenarios of a global zombie pandemic that nevertheless reflect on actual society. My task here is not to write an expose either of the authors' political views, but rather to consider the how the novels displace current social and political problems onto a post-apocalyptic landscape in order to imagine solutions. My reading of this method of social critique ultimately reveals a disturbing tendency to imagine social collapse and mass death as a necessary measure to build American society anew.

[17] For an in-depth discussion of the difficulty and politics involved in defining the science fiction genre, see Atwood, Margaret. *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. New York: Anchor. 2011. Print.

A History of the Future: *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*

Brooks' novel is easily situated in that subgenre of science fiction called "future history," which, in the simplest of terms, offers a history of the future. Future histories have been a staple of science fiction since the "golden age" of the 1930's, when science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres were first being defined by the likes of N.F. Stanley and Joseph Campbell, the revered editors of the early pulp magazines *Thrilling Wonder Stories* and *Astounding Science Fiction*, respectively.[18] Like its future history predecessors, *World War Z* takes place in the real world and along our own historical timeline. References to real-world nations and historical events such as WWII, the Vietnam War, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the American Civil War discredit a reading that would displace the action of the novel to a similar but parallel universe. The exact year of the zombie outbreak is never stated, but the details of popular, political, and celebrity culture confirm that the zombie war takes place in the early twenty-first century. For example, the Three Gorges Reservoir that began construction in 1994, the SARS epidemic that occurred in 2002-2003, and the popular "tween" star Jamie Lynn Spears (who appeared on the Disney Channel from 2005-2007) are all referenced in the early pages of the novel.[19] These references tie the novel to the real world and the

[18] "Future History." Def. 2. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Oxford English Dictionary, 1989. Web. February 5, 2013. Some notable future histories include H.G. Wells' *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933, Penguin Classics 2005) and Robert Heinlein's *Future History* series (1941-1968) Published in a single volume entitled *The Past Through Tomorrow* in 1985. For a literary history of the science fiction genre, see Isaac Asimov's *Before the Golden Age: A Science Fiction Anthology of the 1930s* (Doubleday 1974).
[19] Brooks, Max. *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006. Print. 8, 56, 64.

contemporary period for its readers. The history it outlines has not yet occurred, but it is meant to present a plausible near future for the real world. As a future history, *World War Z* has plenty to say about both history and the future. By placing the zombie war in contemporary readers' imminent future, the novel invites readers to interpret current social problems as pre-cursers to apocalypse. In doing so, the novel entangles itself in historiographical debates about how history is narrated. The foreshadowing techniques present in *World War Z* are merely a novelistic device to create suspense. In historical documents, however, foreshadowing is a questionable technique that can possibly give the impression that certain historical events were inevitable.

The novel does not address its contemporary readers directly, but instead imagines a readership in the future for which the text is a historical document. The narrator is a United Nations official charged with collecting data for a "Postwar Commission Report." In the introduction, the narrator explains that upon receipt of the collected interviews and data, the committee chairperson chose to remove a whopping one-half of the material, claiming that it was "too intimate" for a report that was meant to contain only "clear facts and figures" (Brooks 1). The narrator is moved to publish the interviews that were cut from the official report in order to preserve "the human element" of "the greatest conflict in human history," lest these perspectives be lost to future generations. The narrator asks, "…isn't the human factor what connects us so deeply to our past? Will future generations care as much for chronologies and casualty statistics as they would for the personal accounts of individuals not so different from themselves?" (2-3). Thus introduced, the novel frames itself as a historical document deeply committed

to the methods of cultural history or "history from the ground up" that values the individual perspectives of historical actors and seeks to expand on chronologies that privilege only "official" sources. This method of history is generally attributed to a post-structuralist turn in western historiography that mirrors postmodernism's distaste for "grand narratives," including teleological history.[20]

Brooks explains in an interview that the idea to create a faux oral-historical account of the zombie apocalypse came from his reading Studs Terkel's *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War II* (1984).[21] Terkel's Pulitzer Prize-winning history of WWII features interviews from soldiers, factory workers, and other Americans that participated directly and indirectly in the war. He foregrounds memories and experiences, rather than dates and figures, which ultimately celebrates the generation of Americans that lived through or fought in "the good war." Brooks imitates Terkel's historical method, but more significantly he invokes the same nostalgia for the WWII era that Terkel's subjects exude. For example, Brooks entitles his fifth chapter "Home Front USA," a civilian term for the nation's active support system for soldiers deployed abroad during WWII. In this chapter of the novel, America's post-apocalyptic comeback is contingent upon organizing a "Department of Strategic Resources," which operates much like a conglomerate of the War Production Board, the Office of Price Administration and the U.S. Food Administration did during WWII. The return to food and resource rationing, recycling raw materials, and job assignation are celebrated in the novel as an

[20] See Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory*, especially chapter three, "Poststructuralism and Deconstruction."
[21] "Exclusive Interview: Max Brooks on World War Z." eatmybrains.com. Web. 10 February 2013. <http://www.eatmybrains.com/showfeature.php?id=55>

opportunity for the U.S. to return to a nostalgic ideal of the WWII era. In Brooks' re-imagining of an improved America, there is a palpable longing for a simpler time in which identifying the good guys and the bad guys was a matter of whether or not one wears a swastika, and national pride and identity were supposedly less problematic. The connection this novel makes between "the good war," the zombie apocalypse, and American society's renewal reveals a disturbing politics that would welcome a worldwide catastrophe as an opportunity to return to an idea of American national unity.[22]

In addition to positioning war as an opportunity to reinstate WWII-era values, Brooks' narrative glorifies a version of American history that privileges war and directly contradicts the pluralizing objective of the oral history form: The novel's title "World War Z" recalls the World Wars of the early twentieth century and places the fictional zombie war in their lineage. The zombie war, then, becomes a rather unexpected version of World War III and is the inevitable next addition to the American historical timeline. This approach to history locates the American cultural legacy in a timeline of wars and conflates American identity with national trauma. The narrator dislikes the name "Z War One" for the conflict, "as it implies an inevitable 'Z War Two,'" yet the entire first half of the book is dedicated to pointing out just how vulnerable "prewar" society is to almost

[22] Terkel, Studs. *"The Good War": An Oral History of World War II*. 1984. New York and London: The New Press, 1991, Print. Terkel gestures toward problematizing a totally celebratory approach to WWII in his introduction, where he explains that the titular phrase "good war" appears in quotes "not as a matter of caprice or editorial comment, but simply because the adjective 'good' mated to the noun 'war' is so incongruous" (11). While this explanation proves that Terkel is aware of the dangers of idealizing war, his introduction ends with a quote from a Red Cross worker that clearly idealizes WWII in American history: "We had twenty years of greatness in this country, when we reached out to the rest of the world with help… Now, we're being pinched back into the meanness of the soul" (15).

any kind of global catastrophe. Chapter one is even entitled "Warnings," and discusses the events that lead up to the apocalyptic outbreak. Literary and historical scholar Michael André Bernstein criticizes such methods of narrating history. He specifically denounces practices of "foreshadowing, or retrospectively assuming an inevitable sequence of events" leading up to the Shoah. No historical event is inevitable, he argues, and history moves on the basis of contingencies, choices, accidents, and possibilities. James Berger adds that although Bernstein is right to question the ethics of a "foreshadowing" or prophetic narration of historical events, something like the Shoah "does occupy a central position, dividing history into a 'before' and an 'after,' and radically restructuring our understandings of events on either side" (Berger 21). Berger's argument is inconclusive as to what a possible solution might be to this historiographical issue. He insists that some catastrophic events have the power to "obliterate existing narratives," suggesting that foreshadowing history may be more of symptom of apocalyptic trauma than lazy scholarship, and thus unavoidable to some degree.[23]

Chapter two of the novel is entitled "Blame" and it outlines the reasons why the United States failed to stop or even adequately prepare for the zombie epidemic. The narrator visits Vostok Station in Antarctica to interview Breckenridge Scott, an American whose escape to the arctic refuge was made possible by the huge financial success of his brainchild, the Phalanx vaccine, in the beginning stages of the outbreak. Phalanx was rushed through development and FDA approval in the early stages of the plague despite the known fact that it had no effect on the zombie disease. Nevertheless, the placebo

[23] Bernstein, Michael André. *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. Quoted in James Berger, *After the End*.

vaccine sold extremely well. Scott explains the high sales with his business mantra, "fear sells." He emphasizes that the news media's reportage of the early stages of the outbreak was a "full hour of speculation about what would happen if the virus ever made it to America," and relayed only a few useful facts (Brooks 55). Following the media's lead, Scott created his dummy vaccine to make money on the latest disease scare. When asked how the faulty product managed to clear the FDA inspections, Scott explains, "Back then the FDA was one of the most underfunded, mismanaged organizations in the country… Plus, this was one of the most business-friendly administrations in American history" (56). The drug gave the American people an extremely false sense of security, and is one of the reasons that millions were so unprepared to survive once the outbreaks became more serious and people were forced to flee their homes. Scott's sarcasm and snide remarks, such as "God bless the news" create a caricature of the soul-less American capitalist, completely without a sense of civic or moral responsibility. But his story also points out the social and government structures that allowed capitalist entrepreneurs like Scott to thrive: "You wanna blame someone," Scott explains, "why not start with all the sheep who forked over their greenbacks without bothering to do a little responsible research. I never put a gun to their heads" (58). The America that Scott describes isn't simply unprepared for a pandemic, it is already sick. Capitalists like Scott, the fear-mongering media, and inept government institutions together constitute an apocalyptic tinder-box just waiting for the right spark.

The list of political, cultural, and structural weaknesses in "prewar" America effectively diagnoses the ills of a society that, in the future the novel imagines, cause the

zombie apocalypse. In the real world of the novel's readers, the United States Center for Disease Control website confirms that there is no possibility of a zombie apocalypse ever coming to pass. Yet the damning critiques of everything from bloated government bureaucracy and unethical business to celebrity and virtual culture are designed to ring true for readers.[24] What's more, the social critiques the novel levels are precisely against elements of culture that are considered postmodern, most notably capitalism's sway over political and social life. Like the postmodern critics discussed above, Brooks' novel equates postmodern culture with disease. Contemporary American culture is weakened by its diseased elements, so much so that it is primed for an apocalyptic plague.

The novel's critiques of postmodern society are problematic since it uses the postmodern method of oral history to do so. This tension also reflects the novel's utopian project: in order for America to be purged of the negative aspects of postmodernity and rebuild itself anew, society must totally collapse. The United States doesn't just survive the zombie apocalypse in this novel; it is actually better for the apocalypse having happened. While Brooks may not have read postmodern theorists like Lyotard, Harvey, Jameson, and Baudrillard, his narrative echoes their apocalyptic predictions for the culture of postmodernism. Using apocalyptic rhetoric to theorize culture encourages narratives like *World War Z* that cannot imagine utopian solutions unless they are preceded by mass death and social collapse. Brooks' fiction articulates a defeatist

[24] The United States Center for Disease Control initiated a "tongue-in-cheek" publicity campaign for disaster preparedness using the scenario of the zombie apocalypse in 2011. While the site is clear that there is no disease in existence that can turn people into flesh eating monsters, CDC director Ali Khan insists that "If you are generally well equipped to deal with a zombie apocalypse you will be prepared for a hurricane, pandemic, earthquake, or terrorist attack." <http://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2011/05/preparedness-101-zombie-apocalypse/>

political imagination that I argue is a direct result of the apocalyptic rhetoric of cultural critics.

The story of how the U.S. overcomes the zombie apocalypse is postured as a classic hero's tale: The "pre-war" United States is powerful and wealthy, but lacks the values that once made it great. Through trial and hardship, America re-discovers its roots and emerges stronger than ever before. America's comeback is described in detail throughout the "Home Front USA" chapter. In it, the narrator interviews Arthur Sinclair, head of the U.S. government's Department of Strategic Resources, formed during the zombie war as a stopgap survival measure for what remained of the population. After the "Great Panic," during which civilization as we know it collapsed and people fled their homes for safety in colder climes, a safe zone was established behind the Rocky Mountains. From there, a kind of reverse Manifest Destiny mission commences to reclaim the eastern half of the country. The effort to reclaim the infested territory and ensure the survival of the human race became the singular objective and rally point for the divided American people. "We had to get people on their feet again – clothed, fed, housed, and back to work," Sinclair explains (Brooks 137). In order to "harvest the right tools and talent" for the war effort, Sinclair organized "a massive job re-training program" that was "an instant success." Retraining the population in what we now consider trade labor – farming, carpentry, masonry, and gunsmithing – allowed the struggling bands of refugees to re-establish organized civilization and go to war against the zombie hordes. "It was the largest jobs training program since the Second World War," Sinclair says, emphasizing the role that WWII nostalgia plays in this comeback narrative (139). While the Sinclair interview makes it clear that not everyone was happy with a class and racial hierarchy turned upside down, the overall effect of the move from an import service

economy to a local manufacturing economy was enormously positive. Sinclair gushes: "It gave people the opportunity to see the fruits of their labor, it gave them a sense of individual pride to know they were making a clear, concrete contribution to victory, and it gave me a wonderful feeling that I was part of that" (141). American technological prowess and a patently Protestant work ethic resurface after decades of sloth in this tale of de-de-industrialization.

What the Sinclair interview elides is that in order for the resurgence in these WWII-era "American values" to occur, a political scheme quite akin to fascism is put in place. Private property is abolished in post-zombie war America, jobs are assigned based on skill rankings, and rations are distributed by the central government according to need. In addition, a strict penal code is put in place with repeat offenders sentenced to the "work gangs" and the death penalty implemented, although "only in extreme cases" (149). The celebration of American greatness in this novel is fraught with contradiction – the acting president makes a moving speech in defense of democratic principles of representative government, yet several pillars of American identity are abandoned in the reconstruction efforts, namely private property and free market capitalism. By the end of the novel, the United States has renewed itself culturally and economically. The zombie apocalypse works like a catalyst to move American society away from TV culture, unethical capitalism, and political apathy – all symptoms of the "condition" of postmodernity.

Americans in *World War Z* are united in their efforts to fight against an inhuman enemy and find satisfaction in the new agrarian and manufacturing sectors of labor. However, in order for this consolidation of American national identity to occur, over eleven million people die from exposure, starvation, and infection in North America alone (129). Brooks' American utopia requires a sacrifice not just of white collar luxury and media-saturated lifestyles but also of human

lives. Berger considers this kind of apocalyptic scenario to bring about a utopia an expression that "no social reform can cure the world's diseases." In this worldview, Berger writes, "Every structure of the old world is infected, and only an absolute, purifying cataclysm can make possible an utterly new, perfected world" (35). Berger's characterization sheds new light on the vein of postmodern criticism that insists on discussing cultural trends by invoking the rhetoric of disease: By pathologizing postmodern elements of contemporary society, critics like Baudrillard, Harvey, Jameson, and to a lesser extent Lyotard, invite apocalyptic utopian scenarios like Brooks' zombie epidemic. While *World War Z* remains purely fictional, the novel nevertheless expresses a longing for the apocalypse to wash away the old to usher in a new and better era of American nationalism.

Postmodern Survivalism in *Zone One*

In his 2011 novel, *Zone One*, Colson Whitehead parodies the zombie apocalypse subgenre, playing on its tropes and repurposing its metaphorical scope to his own ends. In doing so, Whitehead explores the possibilities of postmodern, apocalyptic, and utopian discourses with biting irony. Like *World War Z*, *Zone One* critiques postmodern culture. Unlike Brooks, however, Whitehead compares postmodern culture to the imagined post-zombie apocalypse of the novel, revealing the ways in which the zombie apocalypse has already happened – symbolically at least. Postmodern culture, the novel seems to suggest, is disastrous and destructive. In this way, one could easily align *Zone One* with the rather apocalyptic descriptions of postmodernism that Jameson, Harvey, Baudrillard, and Lyotard offer. These critics might appreciate the way Whitehead uses the trope of the zombie horde to illustrate concerns about race, class, and privilege in America. However, the disparate interpretations that characters have of the zombie horde indicate very different programs for the future of America that complicate any simple notion of apocalypse or utopia that *Zone One* might offer. In fact, by the end of the novel, the utopian project of the novel's characters totally collapses, leaving readers to wonder whether the apocalypse can or should bring about a utopia at all.

The real name of Whitehead's protagonist is never revealed. He is always referred to by his nickname, Mark Spitz – who is the former world record holder in Olympic swimming. The Mark Spitz of the novel receives his nickname after single-handedly taking down a truckload of "skels" (the novel's name for zombies). When confronted

with the large group of lethal skels, Mark Spitz's comrades jump into a nearby river to escape the unexpected attack. When asked why he did not jump, Mark Spitz says that he doesn't know how to swim, a lie that plays upon stereotypes that African Americans cannot swim. The real reason Mark Spitz takes on the horde by himself is because he believes that he is particularly suited to survive the apocalypse: "He was a mediocre man. He had led a mediocre life…Now the world was mediocre, rendering him perfect."[25] Mark Spitz decides to hold his ground to test his "perfect man" theory, and lives. Mark Spitz might be perfectly suited to survive the apocalypse, but his identification with the post-apocalyptic America ultimately offers a damning critique of the society that preceded it.

Throughout the narrative, Whitehead's protagonist compares life before and after the zombie apocalypse, often concluding that the two are quite similar. The book opens with the protagonist's memories of childhood visits to his uncle's apartment in New York City. The passage expresses nostalgia for childhood dreams of desiring a certain "brand of manhood" exuded by the uncle's success in the big city. The "well-stocked and white-walled" New York apartment "resembled the future" for young Mark Spitz (8). The punch line is that Mark Spitz is at present part of a civilian sweeper team charged with removing skels, bodies, and dead pets from the buildings of lower Manhattan: "Yes, he'd always wanted to live in New York," the first chapter concludes morosely (128).

Whitehead uses the zombie apocalypse as a metaphor for contemporary life in New York City throughout the novel. The New York Mark Spitz imagined as a child and

[25] Whitehead, Colson. Zone One. New York: Anchor Books, 2011. Print. 183.

feels nostalgia for is already in many ways a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The city is described as the boy's dreams for the future even as it is called a "ghost ship," a "gravestone" and a "magnificent contraption" fed by the city masses. "New York City in death was very much like New York City in life," Mark Spitz reflects:

> It was still hard to get a cab, for example. The main difference was that there were fewer people. It was easier to walk down the street. No grim herds of out-of-towners shuffled about, no amateur fascist up the street machinated to steal the next cab. There were no lines at the mammoth organic-food stores…The hottest restaurants always had a prime table waiting, even if they hadn't updated the specials since the winnowing of the human race got underway. You could sit where you wanted to in the movie theaters, if you could suffer sitting in the dark, where monsters occasionally shifted their thighs (80).

This passage describing the convenience of living in the city emptied of people is highly ironic, first because Mark Spitz has lived his life afraid to make the move into New York for fear of being "devoured" by the city crowds, and second because the city is made inhabitable for Mark by the skels, creatures that actually devour people (55). The movie theaters could literally contain hostile skels, but the passage also articulates the nature of sharing city spaces with total strangers, a space of complete anonymity but also of hostility and potentially of great danger. The antagonism of the "amateur fascist" who steals the cab also points out the persistence of racism in twenty-first century New York. The difficulty Mark Spitz has in getting a cab is not solely due to the volume of foot traffic on the street, but specifically because of the "machinations" of the prejudiced man up the street and the cab drivers that avoid picking up black passengers. The passage lists a series of spaces in pre-apocalypse New York that are reserved for the privileged, including the "hottest restaurants" and the "organic food stores," which are typically

reserved for wealthy and primarily white patrons. Mark Spitz's sardonic joy in the new accessibility of these spaces drips with the irony that only after an apocalyptic-level plague would these exclusive spaces become available to him, an African American man.

In Whitehead's imagining, the city is hostile territory and the people in it are like zombies even before the plague occurs: "The city had long carried its own plague," Mark Spitz concludes when the sweeper team comes across a lone skel in a pinstriped suit. "It was no longer a skel" in Mark Spitz's mind, "but a version of something that predated the anguishes. Now it was one of those laid-off or ruined businessmen who pretended to go to the office for the family's sake, spending all day on a park bench with missing slats to feed the pigeons bagel bits, his briefcase full of empty potato-chip bags and flyers for massage parlors." Economic recession and capitalist competition create droves of the unemployed and the homeless in pre-apocalypse New York. Mark Spitz ruminates cynically on these forces beyond human control that damn some and spare others; "It was a matter of percentages" he concludes (148-9). The idea that well-being and financial success are meted out by a universal mathematical equation bears a trace of literary naturalism. However, the unnamed forces in this passage are unmistakably related to capitalism's enforced hierarchies of wealth and power, which Jameson's analysis relates directly to postmodern aesthetic and cultural forms. By imagining the zombie as a failed capitalist, Whitehead superimposes the survivalist logic of the post-apocalyptic world onto the contemporary capitalist economy. In doing so, he reveals a disturbing continuity between post-apocalyptic violence and the capitalist economic system. Capitalism, like a zombie horde, is destructive and apathetic to human suffering.

A popular apocalyptic trope is the premonition or the unheeded warning: the muted news program in the background, the strange behavior of a homeless man on the street, or the barely-heard conversation down the hall. In *World War Z*, the "Warbrum-Knight Report" is compiled to warn government officials of the zombie outbreak and detail possible defense and containment strategies. The document is eventually found in the San Antonio field office of the FBI, however, and the warning goes to waste (Brooks 49). Whitehead invokes this trope both as a premonition of the zombie plague but also as a method of foreshadowing the devastating end of the novel: The trips to New York Mark Spitz took as a child "were terrific and rote," he recalls, "early tutelage in the recursive nature of human experience." The city mirrors the recursive nature, as "inevitability was mayor, term after term" and buildings and neighborhoods are forever "butchered, reconfigured, rewired according to the next era's new theories of utility." Mark Spitz recalls the feeling that "there was a message there, if he could teach himself the language" (6-7). This version of the premonition does not communicate the more common atmosphere of crisis, but instead invokes a sense of the historical rise and fall of civilization, pointing to the inevitability of the next fall of mankind. The sentiment appears again when Spitz views the Jersey docks from an apartment balcony: The ruined pylons are "remnants of a dead, seafaring era of trade and commerce" for Spitz, who is attuned from his survival experiences to read such remnants of death in his surroundings (71).

The "message" may be a premonition of apocalypse, but it is also an acute awareness of the violence and lack of authenticity of pre-plague life. The buildings are

not redesigned but "gutted," and the mass of bodies on the street Mark Spitz loves to watch from the windows are fodder for the city, not building or shaping their surroundings but merely "tumbling between the teeth" (5). The image of people as consumable matter for the city humorously parallels the zombie's desire for human flesh.

Whitehead continues to parallel pre and post-apocalyptic life throughout the novel: The plague destroys families and communities as millions are infected and others are eaten or killed. Culture, the crowning achievement of civilization and human comradery, has fallen. However, Mark Spitz's job before the plague perfectly illustrates the demoted and false sense of both community and culture in light of consumerism and technology. Spitz's job before the plague was to create a sense of community and "nurture feelings of brand intimacy" for a coffee multinational via online social networking (184). Spitz delivered helpful and warm messages like "Next time try the Mocha Burst, you'll thank me later" to random strangers who entered the right keyword in an online post. The coffee multination's use of online social media to create brand intimacy highlights just how commodified human interactions have become in pre-plague America.

In drawing connections between pre and post-apocalyptic American society, Whitehead creates an ironic and cutting critique of postmodern culture. However, the novel is also concerned with imagining a future for the United States. Mark Spitz's fellow sweepers Kaitlyn and Gary are both highly invested in the reconstruction efforts of Zone One, but they imagine the future quite differently. While neither of the characters directly lays out a political opinion, the two characters identify the waves of zombie

hordes that attack the walls of Zone One as different kinds of crowds. Kaitlyn, the formerly conservative and upper-middle-class member of the sweeper team, imagines the zombies are "the assembled underclass who simultaneously undermined and justified her lifestyle choices." These included "the weak-willed smokers, deadbeat dads and welfare cheats, single moms incessantly breeding, and those who only had themselves to blame for their ridiculous credit-card debt…" Her fear and hatred for this particular image of the zombie horde recalls what Jameson terms the "fear of proletarianization" or "terror of… slipping down the ladder, of losing a comfort and a set of privileges which we tend increasingly to think of in spatial terms: privacy, empty rooms, silence, walling other people out, protection against crowds and other bodies" (*Postmodernism* 286). For Jameson, this worldview is "a pretext for complacency with our own historical present, in which we do not yet have to live like that," or what he calls "nostalgia for the present" (279). This ultimately conservative socio-political outlook is evident also in Kaitlyn's love of (dead) celebrity biographies and in her constant references to her past life – details that expose her hopes for a return to society just as it was before the plague.

Gary, the last member of the team and former member of said "underclass," pictures the zombies as "the proper citizens who had stymied and condemned him and his brothers all his life…the homeroom teachers and assistant principals, the neighbors across the street who called the cops to bitch about the noise and the trash in their yard" (266). Gary's vision for the future is one in which he will have access to privileges formerly denied by a false assessment of his worth. He spends his downtime learning Spanish so that he can travel to a warm and luxurious island to live the rest of his days in

peace once the reconstruction effort takes off. He schemes with Mark Spitz to patent his idea for a skel-catching tool called "The Lasso," a goal that reveals his desire to gain esteem and income once the economy has returned. Linda Hutcheon writes that "There are, of course, many ways to look backward; you can look and reject. Or you can look and linger longingly." To look back longingly is to feel nostalgia, not for the past as it actually existed, but for the past as you imagine it.[26] Kaitlyn's nostalgic hopes for the future clash with Gary's utopian dreams of equal opportunity. While Mark Spitz's comfortable middle-class upbringing might position him closer to Kaitlyn on the socio-economic scale, he is acutely aware of how his race has justified exclusion to her world of ease and luxury, leading him more often to identify with Gary.

Gary's plans to secure wealth and prestige for the future are constantly frustrated by the persistence of pre-apocalypse class structures in the new "American Phoenix" reconstruction effort. He and Mark Spitz wonder who will win the right to re-inhabit the luxurious apartments the sweeper team clears, but neither are optimistic about their chances. Kaitlyn insists that residences will be chosen by a lottery, but nothing about the Buffalo government indicates such a populist intention. Kaitlyn constantly chides Gary for destroying property, consuming leftover candy or other non-perishables, and for using products or clothing left behind by residents. Reconstruction regulations forbid the use of these items, as those in charge intend to reinstate private property laws as soon as possible. Some of the living CEOs even make a media spectacle of "sponsoring" the reconstruction effort with their products, making them available for use to anyone who

[26] Hutcheon, "Irony, Nostalgia, and the Postmodern."

may need them. The gesture is completely empty, Mark Spitz notes, because there is no way they would regain their inventories anyway. The absurdity of maintaining private property in a world in which people are starving and need access to clothing and other supplies applies just as much to the real world as it does to the post-zombie apocalypse in *Zone One*. Nevertheless, the sponsors contribute to positive morale and build good will toward their brands in hopes of securing a profit once the capitalist economy restarts. In light of the efforts to sustain capitalism and the class hierarchies it maintains, Gary's chances of hitting it big and escaping to paradise are as slim as they ever were before the plague.

The reconstruction effort is flawed from the outset as marketing and branding initiatives take precedence over concrete objectives. Besides maintaining private property in the midst of mass starvation, sickness, and exposure, the interim regime requires a large amount of paperwork from the sweeper teams. Mark Spitz refers to these arbitrary rules and duties as "servitude to the obsolete directives of an obsolete world," which highlights the Buffalo regime's inability to adapt to the post-apocalypse and let go of such needless activities. However, much of civilization is unnecessary, strictly speaking, so re-establishing it will be largely about re-establishing the rules. After all, "If they can bring back paperwork, they can bring back anything" Mark Spitz concludes wryly (39-40). Mark Spitz wavers between his more cynical observations and participating in the optimism for the future carefully maintained by the Buffalo think-tank. Besides naming the reconstruction effort "The American Phoenix," the government has re-dubbed the numbered survivor camps things like "Happy Acres" and "Bubbling Brooks" to combat

PASD, or "post-apocalyptic survivor syndrome" (99). At times Mark Spitz seems to endorse the optimism and sense of futurity in the American Phoenix objectives, even allowing for a sense of historical agency that transcends survivor-shock: "The future? The future was clay in their hands" he reflects early in the novel (81). At other times, however, the "pheenie optimism" is merely another government agenda to reinforce bureaucracy, capitalist ventures, and classist social hierarchies.

By the end of the novel, the Zone One project is revealed to be a mere publicity stunt: "It'll be years before we're able to resettle this island." Ms. Macy, a representative for the Buffalo government, admits, "We don't even have food for the winter" (311). Mark Spitz, luckily, is conditioned to receive this unexpected blow by the many that preceded and foreshadowed it. He discards the optimism for the future he has cultivated in his time in Zone One, and assesses his situation with "now waste-landed eyes." From atop a nearby building, Mark Spitz watches as the "unholy mass" of skels finds the weak spot in the wall's construction and barrels through. He immediately transitions to his survivor mode of thinking, the hyper-adaptive "average" self-posturing that has gotten Spitz through all pre and post-apocalyptic life requirements. As the wall fails and the dead pour through, Spitz concludes Kaitlyn and Gary's debate with his own reading of the zombie horde: "They had been young and old, natives and newcomers. No matter the hue of their skins, dark or light, no matter the names of their gods or the absences they countenanced, they had all strived, struggled, and loved in their small human fashion" (303). The horde does not symbolize any particular group to Mark Spitz, because the plague does not differentiate between race, class, or creed. The zombie horde is not the

poor like it is for Kaitlyn, nor the rich like it is for Gary, but only death which he must resist: “Their mouths could no longer manage speech yet they spoke nonetheless, saying what the city had always told its citizens, from the first settlers hundreds of years ago, to the shattered survivors of the garrison: I am going to eat you up” (304). His description of the plague as the great social leveler emphasizes that equality has finally come to American society in the unexpected form of the zombie plague. Like Brooks, then, Whitehead uses the zombie apocalypse to bring about utopian social reform. However, there is a crucial difference between them: Brooks’ novel cultivates an ultimately disturbing longing for an apocalyptic scenario, because only then could America address its problems. Whitehead’s readers, in contrast, are acutely aware of the horror of imagining mass death in order to imagine racial and class equality. The idea that social equality in America is best construed as a zombie apocalypse is appalling and grotesque. Whitehead’s novel provides cues to guide readers to this opinion, while Brooks ignorantly perpetuates a problematic and ultimately violent political imagination.

Mark Spitz adapts surprisingly well to the breakdown of the wall and the loss all his hopes for the future. In fact, he admits that “he hadn’t felt this alive in months” (311). Civilization, it is revealed, is a sham, a meaningless set of rules and performances and the persistence of racial and class exclusion. Spitz finds his calling instead as a survivor, a more immediate and authentic use of the skills that such a society has cultivated in him. Whitehead’s irony is perhaps overwrought here, as his protagonist would rather take his chances in the post-zombie plague wasteland than re-enter contemporary society. However, I believe that Whitehead’s ending is designed specifically to refuse the kind of

utopian impulse in which postmodern critics and narratives like Brooks' *World War Z* partake. As Hutcheon points out, the future-oriented utopian drive is in fact "equally nostalgic" as a desire to return to an idealized version of the past. In *Zone One*, Whitehead puts the *apocalypse* back in the zombie apocalypse novel by emphasizing that if the zombie apocalypse can offer an opportunity for social reform, it does so only at the cost of society.

In contemporary zombie fiction like *Zone One* and *World War Z*, zombies are not controlled by Haitian Vodou but by killer instinct. Still, like Murder Legendre in *White Zombie*, they threaten to turn individuals into zombies and dismantle society, this time on a global scale. The threat of miscegenation is translated into the more generic threat to the "human race" by the non-human horde. However, Whitehead's novel reminds readers that "post-race" America is not the utopian paradise that Brooks' narrative imagines, nor is the zombie apocalypse a viable symbolic avenue toward its realization.[27] As the skel horde closes in on lower Manhattan, Mark Spitz resolves to make for the river and is amused by the extreme irony that he is nicknamed after an Olympic swimmer. For others, the nickname is a joke because he cannot swim, but the name is also a private joke for Mark Spitz because he can swim and everyone just assumed that because he is black he doesn't know how. The joke in his nickname is far from harmless as it recalls the systemic exclusion of American Americans not only from avenues of wealth and

[27] Ramón Saldívar provides an in-depth consideration of Whitehead's ironic use of the term "postrace" in "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative." *NARRATIVE*, Vol 21, No. 1 (January 2013).

privilege but also from actual swimming pools and similar leisure sites in the Jim Crow south. Whitehead's attention to issues of racial stereotyping and exclusion as the zombie horde forecloses on humanity's future at the end of *Zone One* locates the real disease of contemporary America in the persistence of the social pathogens of inequality.

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